



Rakudoku: Fostering the beginnings of extensive reading (with 5th and 6th graders) in a public elementary school in Japan

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A study was conducted in a Japanese public elementary school with 38 5th and 6th grade learners, who took part in *rakudoku* (Yamanaka, 2009), reading graded readers from the *Oxford Reading Tree* (Oxford Owl, 2017) and *Building Blocks Library* (McDougall, 2010) series over a two month period during English lessons and in their free time. Many of the learners felt they could understand the books they read and found them interesting. To varying extents, all students enjoyed *rakudoku* and thought it was a useful part of their English education. It was concluded that this form of extensive reading could be considered for inclusion in the expanded English elementary school curriculum in Japan from 2020.

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Extensive Reading with Young Learners

It is widely regarded that extensive reading improves reading proficiency (Nakanishi, 2015) and it has been suggested that it stimulates improvements in various areas of language knowledge and use (Nation, 1997). Despite the fact that extensive reading has roots in young learner projects such as the Fiji Book Flood (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983) and the Reading and English Acquisition Program (REAP) in Singapore (Ng & Sullivan, 2001), there has only been a limited amount of extensive reading research conducted with young learners. Of the 71 samples gathered by Jeon and Day (2016) in their meta-analysis, only six con-

cerned children in elementary school.

The use of graded readers and extensive reading has been reported in private schools at the elementary school level in Japan (e.g., MacFarlane, 2011), but as far as I am aware, no such studies have been conducted at Japanese public elementary schools. There are examples of extensive reading projects in elementary schools in other contexts. In nearby Korea, Cho & Choi (2008) found that a combination of read-alouds and 'free reading' increased students' confidence and interest in learning English. Similar findings were made by Cho & Kim (2014) following a program including hearing stories and 'self-selected reading'.

English in Japanese public elementary schools

From the year 2020, there will be changes to English education in public elementary schools in Japan, with the mandatory number of 45-minute lessons per year increasing in 5th and 6th grade from 35 to 70 per year. In addition, English lessons will be introduced in 3rd and 4th grade at 35 lessons per year (MEXT, 2017). Whilst it is unclear how elementary school English will change, it is likely that reading and writing will have a more prominent place in the curriculum.

The current materials provided by the Ministry of Education in preparation for the 2020 changes are fairly limited. For 3rd and 4th grade, there are *Hi, friends Storybooks* (MEXT, 2016b), comprised of only three digital picture books. Then in 5th and 6th grade, students are introduced to *Hi, friends! Plus* (MEXT, 2016a), which includes digital games, chants and worksheets designed for students to practice the alphabet and phonics in an 'A, a, a, apple' drilling style. It seems that the emphasis is on memorizing the letter name and main sound for each letter of the alphabet, rather than encouraging students to use the alphabet for what it is designed for, reading. Krashen (2009) agrees that actual reading can often be neglected, in favor of other approaches, such as intensive phonics or reading strategies.

An increase in English time from 2020 is likely to involve more English lessons being taught by Japanese homeroom teachers (HRTs) without an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) present. Under the current system, in some classrooms, English classes are taught by a HRT, with minimal support from an ALT. In other cases, the whole class is taught by an ALT, with any

range of possibilities between these two extremes. Some HRTs have anxiety about teaching English at the elementary school level (Machida, 2016) and support in the form of tried and tested classroom activities is likely to be useful.

Extensive Reading, often referred to as *rakudoku* in Japanese, may be a suitable activity that could be run by the HRT without an ALT present, as it mainly constitutes students reading independently and helping their friends. When graded readers that are within the linguistic competencies of the HRTs are used, HRTs should be able to provide help to learners where necessary. Also, even if some learners have more advanced English reading skills than their teachers, they could read at their own levels and benefit from this activity.

To address the gap in the research discussed here and with the 2020 elementary school changes in mind, the study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent do the learners feel they understand and enjoy the graded readers chosen for this project?
2. According to these learners, is *rakudoku* a viable activity that could be included in an expanded Japanese elementary school English curriculum?

Methodology

The participants of the current study attended a 'special English zone' public elementary school in Soja, Okayama Prefecture, which already met the proposed 2020 English guideline changes at the time of the study. In addition to learning English through songs, games and communicative

activities, the participants had received some phonics instruction. They had also taken part in 'Joint Storytelling' (Allen-Tamai, 2013), telling stories together as a class rhythmically with gestures and some songs.

A total of 38 learners took part, consisting of 15 in the 5th grade and 23 in the 6th grade. Reading sessions, lasting between 10 and 20 minutes, took place during some regular English lessons. Learners were also told they could read the books, which were always in their classroom, during their free time at school. Data was collected over a period of two months from January to March 2017. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the principal of the school.

Before the project commenced, students undertook orientation. It was explained that *rakudoku* (Yamanaka, 2009), translated as 'read and relax', entailed reading short English books individually or with friends and that three rules, adapted from Furukawa (2006a), should be followed:

- 1) There is no need to look at a dictionary while reading.
- 2) Difficult to understand parts should be skipped over.
- 3) If a book is uninteresting or too difficult, stop reading.

Each class was given 50 books with the mantra 'think big and start small' (Extensive Reading Foundation, 2011) in mind. The books used were taken from levels 1+ to 3 of the *Oxford Reading Tree* (Oxford Owl, 2017) and levels 0 to 3 of the *Building Blocks Library* (McDougall, 2010).

Data collection

Students were asked to fill in a reading log, which was adapted from Furukawa's

(2006b) book log. They recorded the date, title of the book, series name, difficulty level, a short comment in response to the book and an answer to the following two questions:

A. *How much of the story did you understand?*

1. Not much / 2. A little / 3. Most of it / 4. All of it

B. *How interesting was the book?*

1. Not very / 2. A little / 3. Quite interesting / 4. Very interesting

At the end of the project, a self-evaluation was completed by the participants, comprising free comments and answers to the following three questions (translated from Japanese), which were adapted from Cho & Choi (2008):

A. *Did you enjoy rakudoku?*

1. No / 2. A little / 3. Quite enjoyed it / 4. Enjoyed it

B. *Do you think rakudoku is useful for your English education?*

1. No / 2. A little / 3. Quite useful / 4. Useful

C. *Would you like to continue with rakudoku next year?*

1. No / 2. A little / 3. Quite / 4. Yes

All information in the reading log and self-evaluation was written in Japanese, with the exception of book titles and occasional English words in comments. In addition, frequent informal discussions about the project were held with the homeroom teachers of the classes involved.

Results

Reading Log

Each student read an average of between 8 and 9 books, with an average difficulty level of 1.36, from a range of 0 to 3. Whilst graded reader levels vary, levels 1+ to 3 of *Oxford Reading Tree* and 0 to 3 of the *Build-*

ing Blocks Library have comparable *Yomiyasusa* Levels (Furukawa, 2014), so I felt it was justifiable to consider their levels as generally equivalent. The learners logged an average understanding rating of just below the 'understood most of the book' mark at 2.86 and an average interesting rating of just below 'quite interesting' at 2.97.

Self-Evaluation

In answer to Question A, 15 students stated they enjoyed *rakudoku*, 14 quite enjoyed it, nine enjoyed it a little and no one reported that they did not enjoy it. Slightly more positive results were reported in Question B, as 21 students found *rakudoku* to be useful to their English education, nine stating it was moderately useful, eight a little useful and none describing it as not useful. In response to Question C, whilst two students did not want to continue with *rakudoku* in the following school year, 11 wanted to, 15 moderately wanted to and ten wanted to a little.

These results show that all students at least enjoyed *rakudoku* a little and felt that it was at least a little useful, with the majority of students reporting higher engagement than this. There is a slight concern, as two learners did not want to continue with *rakudoku*. However, 95% of learners reported they would like to continue at least a little, which is a big positive.

In the free comments section of the self-evaluation form, whilst learners were given no guidance, several recurring themes emerged in the data. 26% of learners commented that they could read more because they had taken part in *rakudoku*, showing self-perceived improvement. The self-selective nature of extensive reading also proved popular, with 21% of the participants commenting that they enjoyed it be-

cause they could choose their own books. Another finding was that 16% of students enjoyed *rakudoku* because they could help and learn from their friends.

Discussion

In answer to the two research questions, learners generally felt they could understand the books they read and found them interesting. As a majority of learners found *rakudoku* enjoyable and useful, it could be beneficial to include it in the new expanded English curriculum. Introducing extensive reading in a relaxed way could help foster the beginnings of a lifelong relationship with reading in L2 English.

Conclusion

The implications of these results are clearly limited by the sample size and duration of the study, but these learners' reactions do indicate that extensive reading could be a valuable addition to the revised elementary school English curriculum. However, further investigation is also warranted. To begin with, *rakudoku* needs to be tried and tested with a larger sample size and by various teachers in a range of public elementary school classrooms. Further issues that should be addressed include the following:

How should the English reading curriculum be linked across elementary, junior high and senior high school? Before learners read on their own, they would benefit from listening to and interacting with stories (Wang and Lee, 2007) in earlier grades. If children are interested in *rakudoku* at the end of elementary school, joint implementation in conjunction with junior and senior high schools seems logical. The level could be increased across age groups and the learners given manageable reading targets to motivate them to read.

Another issue is, how do we encourage reading outside the classroom? Various services offer eBooks online including *Oxford Owl* (Oxford Owl, 2018), which gives access to over 200 free eBooks, including audio, all of which could be accessed at home. That would raise the question of how to encourage learners to use such services. Ferguson, Sponseller and Yamada (2017) found that inviting parents to school to practice reading books and then taking them home to read to their six or seven-year-old children took English reading and interaction out of the classroom and into the home. Tutoring parents and encouraging their involvement could be the key to stimulating eBook use, too.

Another largely unexplored area is extensive reading in public libraries. There have been tentative steps made by Nishizawa (2015) and Claflin (2012), who have reported the implementation of and engagement with extensive reading programs in the Tokai and Kyoto regions of Japan. These studies offer blueprints for setting up such programs and discuss obstacles which may arise and how they may be overcome. If English reading in libraries is to be encouraged with elementary school aged learners, low level graded readers like the ones used in the current study are needed, along with a plan to get children reading. Library events including book reading and related activities for children (Claflin, 2012) could help and the network of ALTs working for boards of education across Japan could be the ones to run such events, reading books of their choice and running activities like they would in their school assignments.

Whilst the ideas discussed here go beyond the scope of this study, hopefully they provide a platform for any future research in this area. The current study provided

an account of views of the most important people in the learning process, the learners, and showed that a small group of 5th and 6th grade learners were interested in beginning-level extensive reading. At this beginner stage, if learners feel they can read and enjoy the process, this may be enough to encourage further reading at a later stage.

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Biography

Chris Cooper currently works as an English instructor at Himeji Dokkyo University. He worked as an ALT, mainly in elementary schools, in Okayama Prefecture from 2010 to 2018 and has an MA in TESOL from Sheffield Hallam University. His research interests include extensive reading, active participation with pair and group work and the use of storytelling in the classroom.

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